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The **American** *Experience*

Forever Baseball

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Forever Baseball

DAVID McCULLOUGH: Good evening. I'm David McCullough. It's one of the supreme American inventions, like the airplane, or jazz. It's the subject of tonight's film, *Forever Baseball*. Just why we Americans so love baseball is hard to explain even among ourselves.

Some of the appeal is obvious. Anybody can play, young, not-so-young, men, women, all shapes, all sizes. If you're good, there's no limit to how far you can go. All that matters is how you perform.

Everybody can play, and the rules are the same for everybody, and we like that. That's America. It's a team sport, yet, like America, it inspires and rewards individualism. Baseball has given us some of the best-loved heroes in our national life. Who among us wouldn't give almost anything to be a big league star, even if only for a day?

Mark Twain found it hard to think well of the French because they have no word for home. We're a people who have made a national pastime of a game in which the whole object is to "get home," and a lot of what we feel about baseball, I'm sure, has to do with pride in that particular place we call our own.

It's the New York Yankees, after all. It's the St. Louis Cardinals, the Baltimore Orioles, that we care so much about. Some people never get over it when the home team is sold or moves away. That's something I've never had to contend with, thank goodness. The Pittsburgh Pirates are still in Pittsburgh.

Also, there's something about the fact that baseball isn't played against the clock. In baseball, there is no clock. Time doesn't matter; the game matters. A tie game, theoretically, could go on forever.

Maybe we can't get to the heart of the mystery of the game. The Russians are taking it up now, and a recent Russian visitor to New York, after seeing his first game, said, "Something is not simple about baseball, or America."

IRV DRASNIN, Narrator: [voice-over] For true believers, it's a sight to behold, an almost mystical configuration, a geometrically perfect landscape. Its dimensions seem to fit the country, regardless of time or terrain. An institution, almost as old as any in the land. For 150 years, America has made a place for baseball.

IRVING BERLIN, Composer: [singing] *Take me out to the ball game! Take me out with the crowd! Buy me some peanuts and Crackerjack! I don't care if I never get back! Let me root, root, root for the home team! If they don't win it's a shame! For it's one, two, three strikes you're out! At the old ball game.*

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Anywhere you look in America, there's hardly a community, city, town or village, untouched by the game, without a diamond, without a team. Baseball is a game that's left an indelible mark on the culture, and given it something to talk about.

JOHN UPDIKE, Writer: The game is the most redolent of memories in your own boyhood. That waiting, the waiting you do in the outfield, the waiting you do at the bat for the pitch that you can hit. I mean, it's a game of leisure interspersed with these sudden electrical moments when you've got to produce.

DANIEL OKRENT, Editor/Writer: In between those moments, those, you know, those seconds that stretch to minutes, where we are creating that game in our minds, I think that for the writer, that's not just a provocation for the imagination, that's suction on the imagination, that pulls it out.

RALPH FASANELLA, Artist: Baseball, you can kind of sense — when you hit it right, hit the right note, there's a gratification in your painting, your writing, anything you're doing — when you hit it right, bing! It hits right.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Baseball is a game that carries with it the power of myth, the weight of legend, the burden of history.

JOHN WILLIAMS, Writer: Right now, if I looked back at history, I would have to say that it was the sport that most realized the promise of the American dream for the largest numbers of people.

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, Historian: There's something about the combination of baseball being an individual sport, which it is primarily, even though it's a team sport, that captures American history. I mean, we were a nation that was founded on the pioneers who were willing to go from the east to the west, across the Rocky Mountains, as individuals. And yet at the same time, they wouldn't have made it out west if there hadn't been the barn-raising that the community contributed to each time a new house was made. And we always have this uneasy relationship between individual and community in this nation, and I think baseball does, too.

STEPHEN JAY GOULD, Paleontologist: Baseball is sufficiently old in a sports-conscious society that it has come to bear many of the patriotic and other legends. Now, a lot of it is false, because as well as bearing the legends, it bears the ugly side.

QUINCY TROUPE, Poet: Baseball has been and is, and continues to be, reflection of that society. That has nothing to do with the game. The game itself is a great game.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] The 19th century poet, Walt Whitman, wrote: "I see great things in baseball. It's our game. The American game."

For generation after generation of immigrants and their children, the ball game was America.

Mr. FASANELLA: We wouldn't drink milk from the bottle. We wouldn't go to Sheffield or Borden, because that was for the Americans. And we wouldn't buy white bread. So we're foreigners, we're like the Jew, the Greek, I mean, you know, we were the — the ginzos from the other side. And the only thing that made the connection was this baseball game, because baseball was America.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] There's the danger of taking the game too seriously, of being carried away by symbolism and metaphor. But if there are rituals by which a country is known, they include pastimes, some of them repeated summer after summer as far back as anyone can remember.

This wasn't just a playing field, but hallowed ground; not just a game, but an occasion of state. Only in baseball are presidents obliged to throw out the first ball of the season, except Warren Harding, who had a sore arm.

The folklore of baseball is complex and contradictory, a link to America's past. That may explain why the game also attracts the attention of American thinkers, of writers and artists, enough of them to fill the wing of a museum.

To look for the meaning of the game, it may not be enough to go to the ballpark or the record book. It may be found here.

It's almost as old as baseball itself, this need to explore not only the substance but the spirit of the game, to understand its hold on the imagination.

Mr. FASANELLA: You know, it's a ball game, it's a feast of abstract art. The ballpark's got 50,000; I painted 1,000, so I'm really getting the essence of baseball. I grabbed the essence of the field, and if — really, if you look at my painting, they're really flowers, they're flowers. They're in a state of grace in the morning, and the whole thing of flowers, they're flowers. And — but if you can't paint flowers, paint baseball, and if you can't paint it up, don't ever paint.

Ms. GOODWIN: I've often thought, perhaps, that the seed of my love for history really was set in baseball, because in those days, when I listened on the radio to the Brooklyn Dodgers while my father was at work, he never told me that the box scores would be in the paper the next day. So when I kept score for him religiously at home, and would share the game with him on our porch at night when he came home, recreating the history, in other words, of that game, I thought, without me he'd never know what happened to the base-

ball game.

Dr. GOULD: I'm a paleontologist. I work in a fossil record where 99.9 percent of the information is missing. In baseball, everything that happened is known, at least in some overt numerical sense, so we have complete statistics for 100 years of unchanged activity. There's almost nothing else for which we have data like that.

Mr. UPDIKE: For the American male and maybe for many American females now, there is an unbroken continuum of games that you've seen, merging with games that you played in as a child, so that all exercises in oral memory are a way of recapturing your life, and living it, and saying that it mattered. And Proust—as Proust said, the past is paradise. So to enter back into those games, I guess, is a way of entering back into your youth and reversing the flow of time for a while.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] In baseball, you can go back in time, almost as if nothing's changed. Walk into New York's Metropolitan Museum, and here among the treasured relics of ancient civilizations are cardboard icons of a storied past. Icons can be sacred, or profane. For a great many people, these are sacred. That's the great Ty Cobb, the "Georgia Peach." And that's Christy Mathewson—the immortal Christy Mathewson. And this one, of "Honus" Wagner, today is worth \$100,000. Icons don't come cheap. But in baseball, nothing's more valuable than nostalgia, no matter the era.

CONNIE MACK: Let's see, where was you in 1905, Kid?

KID GLEASON: I was in Philadelphia in 1905, Philadelphia Nationals.

Mr. MACK: Oh, that was the year that our Athletics won the pennant and played the Giants for the World Series. You know, the Giants of that year had that great Mathewson, a wonderful pitcher, perhaps the best pitcher this country's ever had.

Well, Kid, do you think the old ballplayers are ahead of the players of today?

Mr. GLEASON: No, I don't think so. I really don't. I think—

Mr. MACK: But you know, it was a little harder going in these old days, wasn't it, Kid?

Mr. GLEASON: You bet your life, it was harder going.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Even then, Kid Gleason and Connie Mack could each look back on more than 25 years in the game. These were the 1905 Giants, raising their championship flag over a game played pretty much as it is today, the same way it was played in 1876, the year major league baseball began. The year Custer lost to the Indians, and Chicago won the pennant.

The game might not have been invented by a general named Doubleday, but by a bank clerk named Cartwright. It hardly mattered. In baseball, as elsewhere, there's plenty of room for both myth and reality.

Mr. MACK: There wasn't any old breast protectors then, was they, or any masks?

Mr. GLEASON: No.

Mr. MACK: And no shin guards either, was they?

Mr. GLEASON: Not then.

Mr. MACK: And them old infielders either, they didn't put on any of them—those large-fingered gloves that you—

Mr. GLEASON: I didn't own any.

Mr. MACK: But things have improved wonderfully since then, though, they haven't they?

Mr. GLEASON: Oh, wonderful, wonderful.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Take it from the novelist, Bernard Malamud. The whole history of baseball has the quality of mythology.

Mr. MACK: Don't you think, though, today, Kid, with it all—no joking aside—that most of these players ought to be playing for the fun of it?

Mr. GLEASON: Well, a lot of them does play for the fun of it.

Mr. MACK: Well, name me a few that plays for the fun of it.

Mr. GLEASON: [laughing] But I can't do that right now, of course.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] There might have been no more hollow laugh in baseball history. They were expected to play for the fun of it, to be honest, even noble. But Kid Gleason knew something was wrong as he watched his team, the heavily favored Chicago White Sox, lose to Cincinnati in the 1919 World Series. Eight of his players had conspired with gamblers. The fix was in. There's been no bigger scandal in American sports.

You didn't have to be there, or know anything about baseball, to know it was a national tragedy.

Mr. OKRENT: I think the fascination was best stated, really, in *The Great Gatsby*, where Fitzgerald has Nick Carraway sitting in a bar and he sees Meyer Wolfshon, the character patterned after Arnold Rothstein, who fixed it, and I'm not going to remember the words exactly, but he fundamentally says, you know, "I couldn't believe that I was sitting 10 feet from the man who played with the faith of the nation as if he were a burglar cracking a safe." And the simple, mundane thing that he just threw some money at this thing that we hold dear, the faith of a nation, and he said, "Hey, I can screw around with that." It's a horrifying thought.

Mr. UPDIKE: The ballplayers of that era were pretty rough customers, pretty simple men, they were farmboys trying to stay off the farm or they were city rats trying to stay out of the slums. And it just shows how much we demand from these men, that they were so thoroughly crushed by the aftermath of the scandal. Baseball, like Hollywood, felt obliged to appoint commissars to supervise its own purity. I guess that's some kind of gauge of the investment that we have in its virtue, that those men were so harshly and probably unjustly punished.

Mr. OKRENT: There was lots of gambling in baseball, and there were lots of thrown games. And in the late 1920s, no one, none less than Ty Cobb and Tris Speaker were accused, on very good authority, with very good evidence, of having bet on and thrown games. But that was pushed away, that was hidden. The Black Sox adventure—not only was it not hidden, it was magnified even beyond its size.

Mr. FASANELLA: We are the purest, we are the American, we had a great—we're honest, it's our whole tradition. We got this game going on, we've got our great heroes like Ruth and baseball, it's tremendous, that we pick up as a kid. Oh, yeah, on the up-and-up, don't forget, kids don't steal, kids don't lie, you know, the whole petty stuff, and I mean, it's an honest game. And you play with a batch of guys, and still it's an honest game. And if you find something went wrong, or you bring into question, is this possible?

DRASNIN: [voice-over] It was possible. The White Sox became the Black Sox, a reminder of what many people wanted to forget. Baseball heroes were human, fallible, could even be crooked. Just like anyone else.

Mr. FASANELLA: I remember a guy in the 1930s who was telling me that baseball is a fixed game. I said, "Man, you're out of your mind, I couldn't believe that for nobody. I wouldn't buy it if it was true—I wouldn't believe it anyway, you know. We're funny."

DRASNIN: [voice-over] A game with the power to shatter illusions also had the power to restore faith. Perhaps as the most enduring of all metaphors about baseball, it's linked to the country, to the land, to the seasons, to spring.

In baseball, too, spring is a time of renewal, of youthful optimism, when all things seem possible, even winning the pennant, whatever the disappointments of seasons past. It's all been said a thousand times before—make that a thousand and one.

Mr. FASANELLA: I've always wondered what the hell is this man Ralph, at 74, gonna be 75, so charged up about baseball? And I've all kinds of answers, ballet, this thing and that thing and that thing, and the main answer, because

it's is bugging me here—I mean, my family says, “Ralph, you're 72, you're still going to see a goddamned ball game.” I still pick up the newspaper, first page is baseball.

Right this morning, two important things, Poland and China. Again, I got to go to baseball first. What is this thing that'll drive you to baseball first? What's the score? What's the thing that gets you?

Well, about a couple of weeks ago, I finally think I got close to it. Remember when you—as a kid, you were four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12. These are the most beautiful age in your life. These are—you're in a state of grace. In that state of grace is the discovery of everything, space, time, smell, feeling. You're innocent, everything is just beautiful. So this thing gets you. Everything in the state of grace.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] This is the way it begins, the age of discovery. Baseball's been called a habit, acquired in childhood. Wherever the field, whoever's playing the game, there's a way to talk, a way to stand, a way to move and, when the ball comes at you, a way to make it look easy.

This is, in equal parts, baseball and initiation rite.

BOYS' TEAM COACH: I won't yell at you if you swing. If it's over your head by a mile, yes, but I mean, if it's in there, swing, all right? Talk among yourselves out there. Let's start playing some good ball. We've got a good team here, but we've got to get it together. We're not playing good ball. All right? If you're going to strike out, I don't mind if you swing your bats. Stand there looking and come back and say, “Aw, gosh, Coach, that was a bad pitch.”

BABE RUTH: Well, a lot of boys, the younger boys, ask me why I hit balls so far when I was a younger boy. I was a young boy, too, just like yourselves. But all of the—the only way I put it, is timing.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] The lure of the game was stored up and saved and passed on, sometimes on film, sometimes from the Babe himself.

Mr. RUTH: ... the only excuse I see why I hit 'em so far, and that's the reason why you see these boys today hitting them so far, they get that timing in the breaking of the wrist.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] But most often, then as now, the classroom was closer to home. That's one of the things about baseball. You don't have to be a Babe Ruth to get the hang of it. It's a legacy, an inherited trust shared by everyone who's played the game, handed down from father to son, from one generation to the next.

Mr. TROUPE: I was primed to become a major league baseball player by my father. I mean, he primed me, you know. We'd go out and pitch when—I mean, we'd go out and he'd catch and I'd pitch, and he showed me how to throw a curve, showed me how to throw the slider, showed me how to throw, you know, a screwball, all those knuckleballs, whatever pitchers have, he showed me.

Ms. GOODWIN: My father was a very cheerful, optimistic, warmhearted man, and he loved to talk a lot. So during the game, everything that was going on, he would be telling me, “Do you see why that guy is doing what he's doing?” or “Don't you see the left fielder shading or coming in, that's because he knows this guy's not going to hit too far, and he's going to hit—try and hit a single.” And I felt like I was learning the wisdom of the ages through him. Somehow there was that sense of being imparted knowledge that I could never have learned on my own, because I knew my father had learned it through years of experience with his father and his grandfather in turn. So that was part of the specialness, that I was learning all the time.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] From ballparks to back yards, baseball provokes not just metaphor, but memories. The game was within reach. Anyone could grip a ball and throw it, grip a bat and swing it, have the dream and pursue it.

BOY, At Bat: Hey, go on, put it over. Put it over the fence! Get another

pitcher out, he's no good! [Hits single and runs to first base] Safe!

Mr. UPDIKE: It's very easy to make a baseball diamond, as we all know. You just need a stone or a brick or almost anything, a sweater, to serve as home plate, and maybe a base or two. A tree can serve as a base. And you're off.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] You were off, but not before the opening ceremony of the sandlot.

Mr. OKRENT: Sandlot games, throwing the bat back and forth, catching the bat, hand over hand over hand, kicking it out to see who gets to have the first pick, you know, a ritual that is repeated, you know, throughout this hemisphere, exactly the same way, and has been the same way for, you know, 90 years, people have been doing that.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] There are rituals by which baseball is known. “Casey at the Bat” has been recited by schoolboys and vaudevillians for a hundred years.

DE WOLF HOPPER: [reciting] *The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day, the score stood four to two with but one inning—*

DRASNIN: [voice-over] In baseball, numbers speak louder than words. By his account, in 45 years on the stage, De Wolf Hopper recited “Casey” more than 10,000 times, each time taking exactly five minutes, 40 seconds to reach the memorable last line.

Mr. HOPPER: [reciting] *There is no joy in Mudville, Mighty Casey has struck out.*

DRASNIN: [voice-over] It became a mythic event, the most famous strikeout in baseball fiction. This 1899 version of “Casey at the Bat” by Thomas Edison was among the first baseball movies made. It was just the beginning.

What could be more American? Cowboys playing baseball. There were no bigger American heroes. It was a very short throw from Tom Mix to Lou Gehrig to your local theater.

TOM MIX: Well, hello, Lou. You're just in time, I'll buy you a drink.

LOU GEHRIG: One of my men was shot a while ago.

Mr. MIX: No!

Mr. GEHRIG: Remember, this strongarm stuff don't go with me.

Mr. MIX: Don't blame you, Lou, and if you tell me who the guy is, I'll help you put him in jail. That's fair enough, isn't it?

Mr. GEHRIG: We'll see about that. Here's one of 'em now!

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Fortunately for the New York Yankees, Lou Gehrig hit better than he acted. Buster Keaton had the opposite problem. In the film, *College*, hoping to win a girl less impressed with brains than with ballplayers, Keaton packed for success.

Baseball films were distinguished by low comedy and high melodrama. But it was melodrama by which baseball would be known and loved, in films like *The Pinch Hitter*. See for yourself, just as audiences did in 1917.

HUMPHREY BOGART, Actor: Well, that's baseball, and it's my game. You know, you take your worries to the park and you leave 'em there. You yell like crazy for your guys—good for your lungs. Gives you a lift and nobody calls the cops. Pretty girls, lots of 'em. And the hot dog at the game beats roast beef at the Ritz.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] When “Bogie” spoke, America listened.

SINGERS: *Take me out to the ballgame! Take me out with the crowd! Buy me some peanuts and Crackerjack! I don't care if I never get back! Let me root, root, root for the home team! If they don't win it's a shame! For it's one, two, three strikes you're out! At the old ballgame.*

DRASNIN: [voice-over] The music of the game has been written in quickstep, one-step and two-step. As quadrilles, marches and waltzes. As polkas, ballads and blues, rags and boogie. But there's been only one anthem.

Mr. WILLIAMS: What I loved was popcorn, the smell of the fresh-cut grass,

the crack of the bat on the ball. I mean, that's corny, but I mean, that was like somebody beginning to conduct an orchestra.

Ms. GOODWIN: If I've just gone to a game, I come home and I can't wait — if they've won — I can't wait to watch them on the evening news, and then the replay I love to watch, after the fact, and then when I — I can't wait to wake up at 6:30 in the morning and get my *Globe* so I can read about the whole game all over again.

Mr. OKRENT: Even more than playing baseball, I like to watch it. And I think now, even more than watching it, I like to think about it, that it's, you know, having absorbed this lifetime of stuff I'm kind of floating — or drowning — in baseball stuff. But it's always with me. It's with me every day and every night, and I think about it before I got to bed. And when I can't sleep, I see if I can think of the lineup of the 1950 Phillies, and it's — endlessly useful.

Mr. UPDIKE: Things perpetuate, you know. Tribes have customs, languages have alphabets, and once one is in place, it becomes its own excuse for going on, in a way. Generation follows generation, people have been talking baseball for quite a while. You know the game, and so after a while it becomes very hard to displace these few signs at the center of our identity, and baseball is one of them.

SINGER: [*Baseball: Opening of Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, N.Y., Universal Animated Weekly*] Brooklyn rest! Sleep well, Flatbush! Rest gently, Williamsburg! Toss not, Greenpoint.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] No place was more identified with baseball than Brooklyn. And nowhere did the music sound as sweet.

[*Universal Animated Weekly*]

NARRATOR: For today is the day of Brooklyn, the day of the big game.

SINGERS: *Oh, Brooklyn! Oh, Brooklyn! Oh, Brooklyn.*

Oh, Dodgers, brave Dodgers! Oh, justify your noble crown! Ever onward, ever upward, until you've won! Dodgers, brave Dodgers.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] The Brooklyn Dodgers occupied a special place in baseball history, worthy of a cantata, and of fans who cared.

Mr. FASANELLA: What I loved about the Dodgers was it was a family affair. They brought their beer, they brought their kids. Then they had some guy playing the trumpet or trombone, walking around. I think they introduced music to baseball. And you went to Dodgers' field, it was a different type of — it was a feast, and that's the way baseball should be.

Ms. GOODWIN: I think part of it is because each game is a human drama unto itself, so that when you've gone to a game, you don't just remember the score, if you're really into the sport you remember what happened, that somebody hit a double when there were two people on base, or somebody struck out when the bases were loaded. And you remember who did that, and even on what pitch they did it. So that you're sharing the game with the person who's with you at the time, but then even more than that, it's a game that can be remembered months, years later, because you really can picture yourself at that game. So somehow it's got its own historical drama. It's like wars. Why are wars so remembered by people? Because they live at the height of intensity, and you can remember the battles.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] There are battles to remember: Bunker Hill, the Alamo, the Polo Grounds. If baseball is about caring, about loyalty and rivalry, then it's about what happened on October 3rd, 1951. The Dodgers and Giants met in a final playoff game to decide the National League pennant. The Dodgers, the team that invented the cry, "Wait till next year!" surely had it won this year.

The Giants had come from 13 and a half games behind in the closing weeks of the season, something no other team had ever done before. Now losing in the last of the ninth inning, the Giants bravely rallied against history, against the

odds, against all reason. No matter who was pitching for the Dodgers, the Giants couldn't possibly win, unless you keep in mind that baseball is about heartbreak, and miracles.

ANNOUNCER: Brooklyn leads it, four to two. One out, last of the ninth. [*unintelligible*] pitches, Bobby Thompson takes a strike called on the inside corner. Bobby hitting at .292. Branca throws. There's a long fly, it's going to be... I believe! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! Bobby Thompson hits into the lower deck of the left field stands. The Giants win the pennant, and they're going crazy! They're going crazy! [*Yells*] I don't believe it! I don't believe it! I do not believe it! And they're picking Bobby Thompson up!

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] Baseball offered possibilities heard throughout the land. The game's never over until the last man is out. It only takes one, one pitch, one chance. The idea was more important than the game, especially for a nation of immigrants looking for common ground, for ways out of ghettos and into America. These were first-generation Americans, for whom the playground was at least one step removed from the tenement.

Mr. FASANELLA: Your mother and father say, "What the hell is this kid going out and playing baseball? Is he crazy? With that stick and a little glove, he's running, chasing the ball? He's a patz, say, he's a little crazy, what do these guys want, playing baseball?" In the meantime, our parents were interested in bread, making a living. My father was a longshoreman, and an iceman, my mother worked in the clothing industry, you know, this was a hard life, and if you — "I gotta go play baseball," they go, "Go, get out, get out" kick you out of the house.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] Legends tell us what we want to believe about a country. Folk tales, about folk heroes. Like the son of an Italian fisherman from Sicily, born and raised in San Francisco, a high-school dropout who suffered from seasickness and a love of baseball. Joe DiMaggio disappointed his father, but won the admiration of a nation.

Mr. FASANELLA: Hey, man, look at DiMaggio's face. He's eastern Europe, he's a Greek, he's Italian, he's a Jew. He's all the other part of the world. He doesn't look like a yano. There was an identification with him as a person from the street, he's a foreign-born guy. See, Ruth was the American star, but Joe DiMaggio, with a name like Joe DiMaggio, I mean, he's Joe Tomorrow, DiMaggio, tomorrow.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] For DiMaggio, and those who looked up to him, baseball was only part of the story.

Mr. OKRENT: If you look at the names, in various periods of baseball's history, in the 1860s the names are Irish. In the 1880s the names are German. After the turn of the century, the names become Polish. In the '20s it was Arri, Crozetti, DiMaggio, Italian. Then black, then Hispanic. And each time, you have the ethnic group that is at the lower — the lowest part of the sociological ladder using baseball as a way to crawl into the mainstream of American life.

DRASNIN: [*voice-over*] The game could claim a place in history, but no one took baseball more seriously than baseball itself. The game's official voice made the biggest pitch of all. No cry was more American than "Play ball!"

NARRATOR: [*"The Democracy of Baseball"*] This is the voice of America, raised with honest excitement, cheering the team. America has many voices, but none is more completely representative than this one. And none comes more simply from the heart. Baseball is one of the great common denominators of American life. When game time rolls 'round, there are no social barriers. There's no wrong side of the tracks among those who play the game. Baseball is everybody's game.

Even the lovely ladies flock to the parks to boo and cheer. Yes, there's

no doubt about it, baseball is king.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] The rhetoric of the game and the country were the same, as if segregation didn't exist. If baseball was an instrument of change, of assimilation, it also was a reflection of prejudices.

Mr. FASANELLA: I didn't know it. I didn't know it. In fact, I didn't know till they made it conscious that the blacks weren't allowed. We do things we don't even know that we're doing. I mean, I sat in the ballpark for 29 years. I never knew that blacks weren't allowed to play baseball. How come I didn't ask the question?

Mr. WILLIAMS: Well, I was a kid then, but I can tell you my sense, from around the house and relatives and being a paper boy for the black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, *Afro-American* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, that nobody who read those papers or talked about baseball had the vaguest hope that black people would ever wind up playing major league ball. It was something you didn't waste your breath discussing.

SINGER: [Hello, everybody, my name is Satchel Paige! Oh, every, everybody, my name is Satchel Paige! I started playing baseball during my early age! I made the big leagues at the age of 42! I made the big leagues at the age of 42! If I had a been a white man, I'd have made it at 22.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] His name was Satchel Paige, and he stood for what should have been. Maybe he was the best baseball pitcher of his time, a time when blacks played in the Negro Leagues. He could only watch the making of another baseball legend, not knowing that someday their paths would cross.

It was the classic American portrait, and baseball's classic tale. The legend of Bob Feller, the boy coming off the farm, pitching hay and fastballs. The 17-year-old schoolkid from a town nobody's ever heard of, who even before graduating from high school leaves home for the big city. Here was living proof of baseball's link to the heartland.

Bob Feller may have been the best pitcher of his time, but we'll never know for sure, because Feller and Satchel Paige shared the same time, if not always the same field. They only played against each other in games that didn't count. They became teammates in the big leagues only when it was too late to matter.

To be black and play baseball when Satchel Paige did, you had to love the game even more, and create your own legends.

Mr. TROUPE: Yeah, my father's there, looking handsome in the back. I don't know if it's fact or fiction, but my father was the catcher in the story of Satchel Paige pitching against the white major league stars, and he got three people on base. The first three people got on base. He walked somebody, somebody got a hit, and an error. So there were three people on base. So he told the rest of the team to sit down. And it was just him and my father. And everybody said, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm going to strike out the rest of the people." And he did. So that isn't one of the great legends and myths in black communities everywhere, amongst those old people, those older people who were into black baseball, that Satchel Paige did that. And so every— you know, when we would think about, "Can we make this, can we do this in this society, can we get over, can we get into the mainstream, can we win?"— you know, we were always— a lot of us would always think about that image.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Baseball, after all, was no more than an image of the nation's passions and prejudices. It helped the country and the game when, in 1947, Jackie Robinson destroyed a myth about who could and couldn't play in the big leagues.

Much has been made of baseball's simple virtues and complex meanings, of its place in the American experience, and maybe there's something to it. You can argue whether art imitates life, or life imitates art, but in the hands of artists — and Willie Mays — baseball is both.

There are many reasons why the country has grown so attached to the game,

why so many of us look at baseball and find America. One reason may be baseball's sense of tradition, of continuity, like returning to an old and familiar neighborhood. The game proceeds at its own deliberate pace, like a summer's day, the best of all seasons. What better time to get a feel for the American landscape? What better place to indulge our selective memories, our wildest hopes and dreams, than at the ballpark?

We know baseball isn't just a kid's game. It can be a hard and sometimes heartless business. But reality is what the rest of life is about. This is about the start of another new season, where the game hasn't yet gotten too big, too impersonal, too mercenary, too far removed from its beginnings. Where you can still get a seat for opening day, to see the hometown Mets. The Pittsfield Mets.

It's among the most wondrous of American miracles, to be paid to play baseball.

PITTSFIELD MET PLAYER: [signing autographs] You probably won't be able to read this.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Cobb and Ruth, Aaron and Mays, they all started this way, in the minor leagues.

PITTSFIELD MET PLAYER: You guys play baseball?

BOYS AT GAME: Yep.

PITTSFIELD MET PLAYER: Good. Stay with it. Someday you'll be here and doing better than all of us. All right, guys? Good luck to you guys. Take care, huh? See ya.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] An English writer, Leslie Hazelton, said of her first baseball game, "It's everything one expects of America, a brass band, plumes and drums and high-stepping youth."

"The perfect American day," she wrote. "The perfect American place."

SINGER: Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave! O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

DRASNIN: [voice-over] Anywhere you look in America, every spring, the ritual renews itself, not just for every game, but the sweet anticipation, the wait for every pitch.

If there are rituals by which a country is known, this is one of them, repeated summer after summer, as far back as anyone can remember.

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For

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